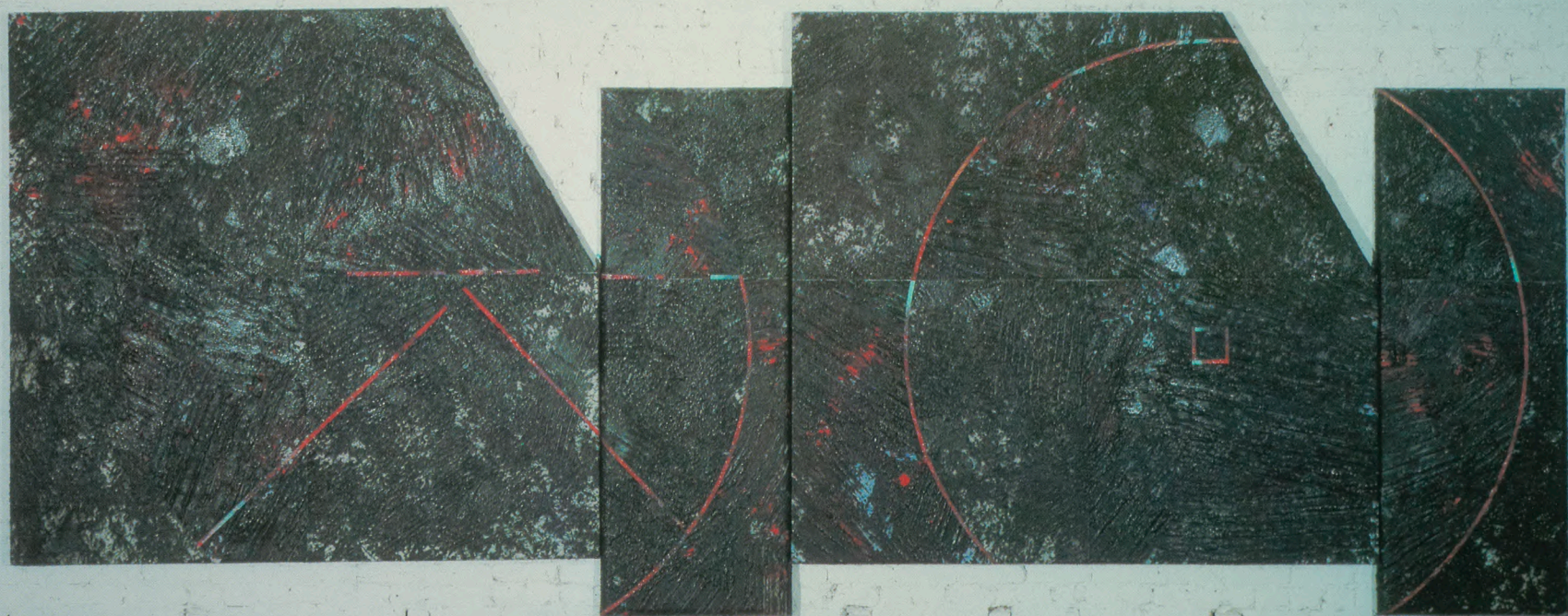
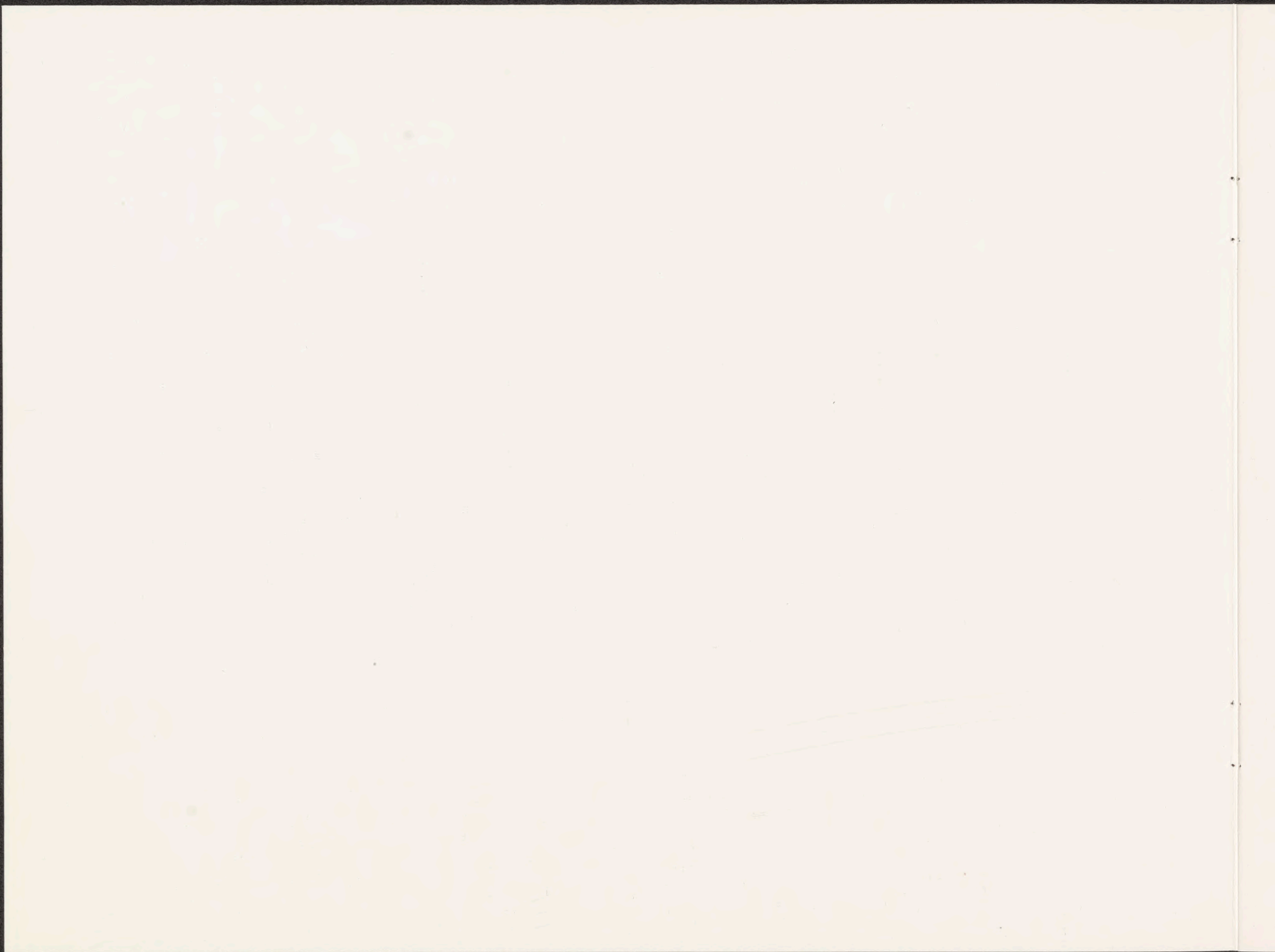


Sam G. Moio



MODERN PAINTERS AT THE CORCORAN



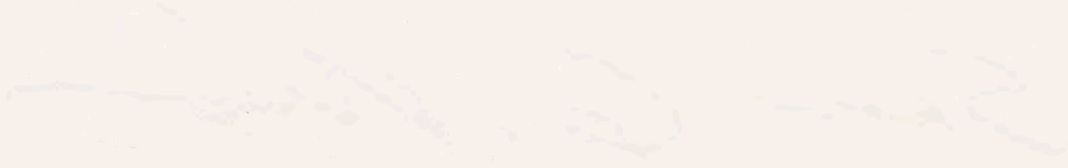
M O D E R N P A I N T E R S A T T H E C O R C O R A N

Sam G. Minton

John Beardsley

March 24-May 22, 1983

THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D.C.



cover: *The Arc Maker I and II*, 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 87 x 212". Courtesy
Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Foreword

This exhibition is the ninth in the continuing series, "Modern Painters at the Corcoran," begun in 1977 with a group of little-known early paintings by Gene Davis. Each show has presented a single cycle of work by one artist. They have ranged dramatically in style, geographic origin, scale and vintage: what they share is internal coherence and a kind of strength in their very monolithism.

The original impulse to undertake a formalized examination of important, often slightly out-of-mainstream recent painting, sprang from my own sense that American painting's cumulative achievement is already being lost in a premature tendency to overanthologize. To present a single body of a painter's work, done in a limited interval of time, is to create a special kind of experience of an artist's production. These shows have neither the density of the extended retrospective view, nor the fragmentary nature of the one-shot inclusion in a survey exhibition. It is hoped that they help us not only to focus on a particular aspect of an artist's production, but in turn to locate various particularities in the complex phenomenon which is contemporary American painting.

Sam Gilliam's recent work represents both a departure in terms of his own career as a painter, and a summing-up in the context of recent expressionist painting generally. There is a uniquely

resonant set of historical implications attaching to our perception of this body of work at this moment in this city: Gilliam seems fully to express the passionate, accretive, richly layered esthetic avant garde impulses of our time, and moreover to synthesize traditional American abstraction and a distinctively black American chromatic dynamism, all in one breathtaking outpouring of variations on a single visual idea.

The immediacy of the paintings' impact is inescapable on seeing these works; and yet the act of communicating this insight is not entirely the artist's. John Beardsley's understanding of the importance of this particular phase of the painter's output, and his decision to organize and write about it, have catalyzed what I suspect may be one of the most memorable events in this exhibition series. "Modern Painters at the Corcoran" endeavors in a vacuum to establish a modest continuum, a unique project embracing the subject of limited aspects of serious recent painting. Such a project requires curatorial inventiveness and ripe subject matter in equal measure; the present occasion testifies to the importance of artist-institutional collaboration in the service of appropriating our own cultural resources.

Jane Livingston

Sam Gilliam at 50

How can we account for Sam Gilliam? Superficially, at least, this should be straightforward enough. He is an abstract painter; black; and a long-time resident of Washington, D.C. To some degree, his accomplishments can be understood within the context of these simple verities. He was a figurative painter before he came to Washington in the early sixties; after an exposure to the work of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Howard Mehring and others of the color abstractionists, he evolved first into a hard edge abstractionist and subsequently into a highly individualistic color field painter. Similarly, his sensibilities were honed or at least confirmed by his association through a number of exhibitions in the late sixties and early seventies with a small but resolute band of Afro-American abstractionists, most particularly William T. Williams and Melvin Edwards. He has since formed alliances with a younger generation of Washington artists, for whom he has become a kind of unofficial spokesman in their often stormy transactions with the Washington cultural establishment.

Yet none of the foregoing *truly* accounts for Sam Gilliam, for he is a better and more interesting painter than can be inferred from any of this. To begin with, his relationship to color field abstraction and more specifically to the Washington color school is hardly as simple as one is sometimes led to believe. Gilliam's

stained paintings—which comprised the bulk of his work from the mid-sixties to the mid-seventies—were more brooding and gruff than ever were Louis's or Jules Olitski's: they conveyed a sense of barely controlled fury that was most unlike, for example, the restraint of a Louis *Unfurled*. They were also unlike Louis in that they were not made simply by pouring paint onto canvas. The paint was poured, splashed and mopped, and the canvas was rolled, folded, crumpled and only sometimes restretched. Those that were not restretched were bunched and hung from walls and ceilings, or draped over impromptu armatures. Given this physically unbounded approach to the act of painting, Gilliam's forbears and allies in abstraction are more properly identified as Hans Hofmann and Jackson Pollock than Noland and Louis.

There is also the issue of Gilliam's motive in these stained canvases: in this too he differs from the rest of the Washington color painters. The somber lavenders of *April 4, 1969* (1969) were intended as a commemoration of the death of the Reverend Martin Luther King. Similarly, the *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson* (1975), in their monumental scale (the three canvases were each some 60 feet in length and hung by a single knot from the ceiling), were meant to evoke the heroic proportions of Robeson's life and achievements. This allusiveness within a non-representa-





tional format was unique to Gilliam. Yet *April 4, 1969* can not properly be said to be *about* Martin Luther King, nor is Paul Robeson the subject of *Three Panels*. These are paintings about painting; that is, about color and composition and texture, and dedicated to the memory of distinguished black Americans.

Gilliam's position vis-a-vis black aesthetics is similarly complex. He abandoned figuration for abstraction just about the time that many politically active blacks were calling for a utilization of content and imagery that were relevant to blacks, that is, drawn from Afro-American life and history or the vast repository of African forms. Describing the conflict of those years, the present executive director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, wrote recently: "the Studio Museum, like Howard University's art department . . . found itself caught up in a Black nationalist fervor . . . (and) . . . as an emblem of the 'real' Black culture, declared abstract art irrelevant to Black American life."¹ Gilliam's commitment to abstraction in the late sixties thus put him at odds with much of the black art establishment. He describes those years as ones of "aesthetic conservatism" in the black community; they were paradoxically—or perhaps consequentially—those during which he made his most emphatic departures from convention by abandoning the stretcher.

In the summer of 1982, Gilliam was selected by Keith Morrison to be included in the Corcoran's exhibition of Washington painting, "Ten Plus Ten Plus Ten." Gilliam in turn selected Delilah Pierce, an abstract painter who has devoted her life to teaching art in Washington schools and colleges. He speaks with considerable respect of Pierce and her recently deceased compatriot in abstract painting, Alma Thomas, not simply for their lifelong dedication to painting, but also for their steadfast commit-

ment to abstraction in the face of criticism. Gilliam tells their stories as if they were parables of his own.

Over the last several years, as abstraction has won wider respect in the black art community, efforts have been made to define what might be specifically Afro-American in abstract painting by blacks. The most notable of these was probably April Kingsley's exhibition "Afro-American Abstraction" at P.S. 1 in Queens, New York, in 1980. The show, which included Edwards, Williams and Gilliam as well as Edward Clark, Richard Hunt, Howardena Pindell, Martin Puryear and Ellsworth Ausby, presented those artists whom Kingsley felt had achieved a balance between their Americanness, their African heritage and their commitment to abstraction. This balance, she wrote, "holds the key, I have come to believe, to unlock the potential for greatness (for blacks) in the visual arts as it has already been realized in music and dance."² One can argue that black visual artists hardly needed abstraction to prove their greatness. Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence have proved that, to name just two, as have countless known and unknown black folk artists, from the masterful William Edmondson to the lusty Steve Ashby. Be that as it may, Kingsley then attempted to isolate African characteristics in Afro-American abstract art. These she described as "threads of common interest in, among other things, atavism and forceful, rhythmic . . . expression." She also related the incorporations of found objects in Afro-American art to the common utilization of assemblage in African sculpture. And, in Gilliam's case, she likened his canvases to African textiles, a comparison echoed by Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell who found "an emphatic allusion to an African aesthetic" in their replication of the tie-dye process.³

But Gilliam's link to an African aesthetic may be at once more

profound and more indirect. It was from African sculpture, via Picasso, primarily, that cubism derived at least part of its impetus; it was from cubism that the abstract expressionists derived at least part of theirs. Gilliam's sources are very much in this cubist-derived abstract expressionist painting, particularly in his work of the last several years. To that degree, his sources are also in African sculpture. Thus said, it is important to note that Gilliam himself sees little point in isolating specifically African sources for his paintings. To him, they are in the mainstream of American abstraction, which draws from many quarters. "There is no need to escape American painting," he insists. "In the various styles and national groups, there is plenty of inspiration."

Gilliam's links to black painting and the Washington color school are thus too complex and ambiguous to provide an accounting for his talents. This is particularly true for Gilliam's recent work: he has transcended and confounded both his Afro-American and Washington roots, and come up with what are unquestionably the best paintings of his career. A proper accounting is thus rendered even more problematic—in the sense that an artist's best works are always somewhat ineffable—and more tantalizing. Gilliam himself, however, provided a clue to the successful consideration of the recent work. He whimsically referred to his new paintings as efforts at "working fuller."

All the paintings in this exhibition date from the eighties, but they have their source in works executed in the mid-seventies. In about 1976, Gilliam effected a transformation in his painting: in large measure, the often unpredictable process of staining was replaced by a planned piling-up of acrylic paint on canvas. Multiple hues were set down, laboriously thick in places, thinner in

others. The mass of pigment was then manipulated on the canvas. It was raked or swept—literally with rake or broom—so that the paint fell into grooves or nervous smears, and the colors, though still distinct, began to fuse.

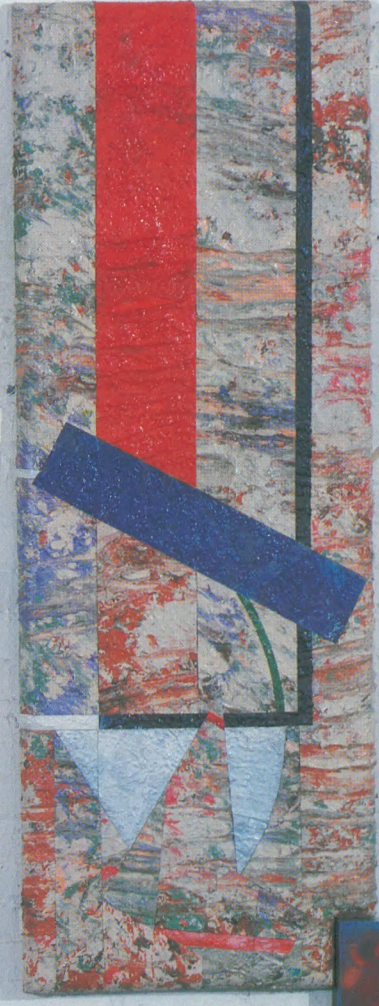
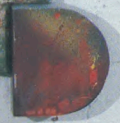
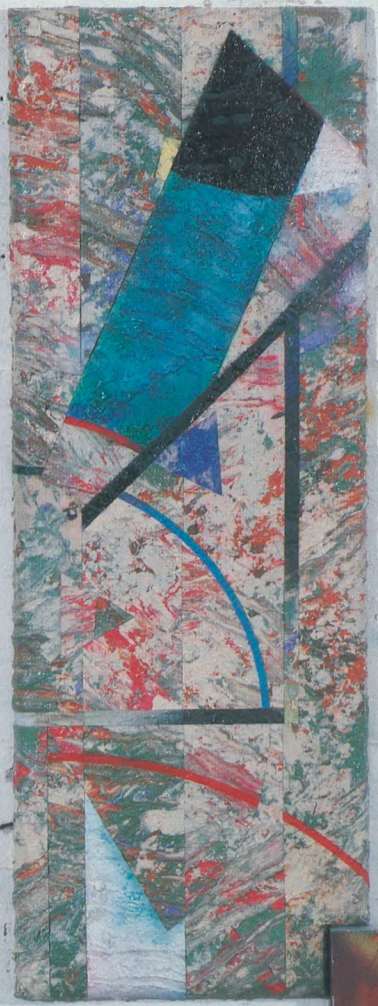
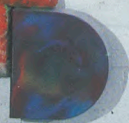
Two or three years before this transformation in technique, Gilliam had begun cutting up his stained canvases, rearranging the parts and gluing them back together. This operation also found its way into the impastoed works, resulting in sudden shifts in color and texture. The first cuts were generally quite simple and regularized geometric ones: rectangles, squares and triangles. But Gilliam ultimately became much freer with them, cutting irregular shapes, exchanging them between paintings, layering them, sometimes painting over the parts before returning them to their original positions or capriciously setting them down somewhere else.

In a word, Gilliam's painting by the late seventies had become much more deliberate. The chance results of staining, folding and draping had been replaced by a far more conscious effort at composition. Not only was the pigment more purposefully manipulated, but the cut forms were given more and more emphasis, establishing structural relationships that rivaled coloristic ones for predominance within the paintings. Almost all of Gilliam's paintings were now restretched, on beveled and shaped stretchers that themselves affirmed his new emphasis on structure.

The "Chasers," from 1980, are perhaps the first works in which the compositional structure is about equally derived from color and shape. Gilliam executed about seventeen paintings in this format at an eighty- by ninety-inch size; several others were done in a somewhat elongated format. Three of the smaller ones—*Purpled*, *Black Harbor* and *Bluesette*—are included in this exhibition, together with one of the longer ones. All of the

Cartouche (two panels on the right, hung together with two diptychs from the "Eagle" series), 1981. Acrylic on canvas, 82 x 106½". Scott H. Lang, Washington, D.C.





smaller ones are nine-sided polygons that vaguely resemble the shape of Australia, while the longer ones occasionally have one or two more sides. Significantly, most of the Chasers are not paintings with just a few cuts or exchanged parts. They are composed almost entirely of odd-sized and shaped triangles and quadrilaterals, some with similar but many with contrasting colors and textures. In this they resemble crazy quilts, with insistently polygonal and polychromatic characters (one of the Chasers is in fact titled *Quilted*). What is significant about these paintings is that Gilliam here abandons the primacy of color as a compositional determinant and allows the relationships between textures and shapes to carry equal weight.

Gilliam's red and black paintings of the following year are surpassingly elegant, virtually monochromatic works done in the same cut and glue technique. Most are diptychs or triptychs formed of triangles, rectangles or pentagons, with the red or black paint raked, poured or splashed over an underpainting of green or blue or, in the case of the black paintings, red. Strips of canvas are cut out, repainted and replaced to form lines and arcs that cross from one panel to the next, pulling them together. In a few instances, these arcs are not actually cut and lifted out, but made by spray painting over a template. *Arc Maker I* and *II* reveal their structure perhaps more explicitly than most of these paintings. They are both diptychs, each with one rectangle and one pentagonal element. The pentagons were first cut into quarters; three of the quarters were then bisected by arcs and the opposing elements exchanged between the pentagons. Similar cuts and exchanges were made between the rectangular panels. The lines and arcs

were highlighted by repainting them a different color, and the panels hung in such a way that the circles continue across the gaps between the panels. The *Arc Makers* are thus typical of the red and black paintings in that their apparent uniformity is broken by subtle shifts in color and texture.

The "Vertical D's" are considerably less subtle, but compositionally perhaps even more sophisticated. Against textured backgrounds of rather soft colors—white generally predominates—Gilliam has collaged lines, arcs, triangles, and rectangles in a remarkable variety of colors and shapes. Although the backgrounds themselves are assembled from multiple strips, they are chromatically and texturally similar, while the superimposed lines and shapes are painted in contrasting colors, often primaries. The "Vertical D's" are the most clearly cubist-derived of Gilliam's works, calling to mind in particular—in the layering and the flat geometric shapes—the synthetic cubist collages of Braque and Picasso. Indeed, several paintings in the series are titled *To Braque*: Gilliam explains that the series was in part inspired by seeing a Braque still life (a mantelpiece with birds) at the Art Institute of Chicago. But they are cubist-derived via Malevich. These floating rectangles, just barely bonded together by lines and arcs over a receding ground, these primary colors: they ally the works with the suprematist paintings of Malevich and his immediately pre- and post-revolutionary Russian colleagues. While the red and black paintings maintained Gilliam's traditional shallow picture plane, these geometric compositions teeter before Malevich's deep and vertiginous space.

Gilliam has attached to each of these paintings, in the lower right hand corner, an enameled metal "D" shape that gives the series its name. He describes these "D's" as an emblem of the

Three paintings from the "Vertical 'D' " series: *Muse II*, *To Miro with Symbols* and *Muse IV*. All 1982, acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29". Left and right: Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.; center, Dorothy Gilliam, Washington, D.C.

collaging technique and as a catalyst or key to inspire recognition of the formal and spatial relationships within the paintings. They function in part by contrasting angular with round, canvas with metal and rough acrylic with smooth enamel.

There is a way in which Gilliam serves as a kind of paradigm of the last decade in art. Much has been made of the death of the avant garde, about the exhaustion of invention, about the failure of the avant-garde artist to provide the lay public with a new vision of the world or, indeed, to be particularly relevant at all. Sensing this, many artists have abandoned their reformist postures in favor of revivalism or pluralism, in works that seem more fashionable than serious. There is a sense of casting about for a substitute for the notion of originality as a generating principle for contemporary art. Gilliam has, for his part, been identified with the avant garde in the past, particularly because of his decision to eliminate the stretcher and drape his paintings from walls and ceilings and over impromptu armatures. These works have been hailed as a "daring liberation of the canvas from its stretcher"⁴ and "an infinitely more radical departure than the large scale of Pollock or the shaped canvases of Stella."⁵

But from a revisionist point of view, there is something forced or willfully inventive about these draped works. They seem an expression of an era that valued originality—the breakthrough—above all else. They have been replaced by something far better: paintings in which there is a new and equal emphasis on formal

and chromatic structure as an expression of command and a means of control. These can perhaps be legitimately described as more conservative works, as they are based on the time-honored and proven compositional techniques of synthetic cubism and suprematism. Yet in no sense do they mark a retrenchment. They represent a substitution of authority and self-control for willful originality and invention as standards of quality. It is in this sense that Gilliam represents a paradigm for recent painting: his true advance has come from recovering the lessons of past masters and adapting them to his own particular purposes. While many recent painters have attempted this, few have accomplished it so deftly.

Gilliam has always been a *good* painter. A re-evaluation of his earlier work in light of his recent achievements serves less to denigrate the former than to allow the latter fully to shine forth. Gilliam is now a world class painter.

¹ Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Sam Gilliam: Journey Toward Red, Black, and 'D,'" in *Paintings by Sam Gilliam: Red and Black to 'D'* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982): 9–10.

² April Kingsley, *Afro-American Abstraction* (San Francisco: Art Museum Association, 1982): unpaginated.

³ Campbell: 6.

⁴ Campbell: 9.

⁵ Hugh M. Davies, "Outdoor Paintings," in *Sam Gilliam: Indoor and Outdoor Paintings, 1967–1978* (Amherst: University Gallery, University of Massachusetts, 1978): 1.



Catalogue of the Exhibition

“Chasers”

1. *Black Harbor*, 1980
acrylic on canvas, 80 x 90"
Private collection
2. *Bluesette*, 1980
acrylic on canvas, 80 x 90"
Chris Middendorf, Washington, D.C.
3. *Purpled*, 1980
acrylic on canvas, 80 x 90"
Private collection
4. *Yellow Chaser*, 1980
acrylic on canvas, 80 x 120"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.

“Red and Black”

5. *The Arc Maker I and II*, 1981
acrylic on canvas, 87 x 212"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
6. *Cartouche*, 1981
acrylic on canvas, 82 x 106½"
Scott H. Lang, Washington, D.C.
7. *Elm*, 1981
acrylic on canvas, 172 x 70"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
8. *Lion's Rock Arc*, 1981
acrylic on canvas, 82 x 191"
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
9. *To Leave the Forest*, 1981
acrylic on canvas, 96 x 347"
University of the District of Columbia, Carnegie Library
U.D.C. Fund, Inc.
10. *Xian*, 1981
acrylic on canvas, 82 x 191"
Dr. and Mrs. Marvin Mordes, Baltimore

“Vertical “D’s”

11. *Mantelpiece with “D”*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Jack Rasmussen and Elsie Hull, Washington, D.C.
 12. *The Muse II*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 13. *The Muse III*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Dr. and Mrs. Stanley Tempchin, Bethesda, Maryland
 14. *The Muse IV*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 15. *The Muse V*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 16. *The Muse VI*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 17. *To Braque and Flowering Birds*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Ann and Donald Brown, Washington, D.C.
 18. *To Braque with Cartouche*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Ann and Donald Brown, Washington, D.C.
 19. *To Miro—To Birds*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.
 20. *To Miro with Landscapes*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
University of the District of Columbia, Carnegie Library
U.D.C. Fund, Inc.
 21. *To Miro with Symbols*, 1982
acrylic on canvas, 73 x 29"
Dorothy Gilliam, Washington, D.C.
-
22. *Rondo*, 1983
acrylic on canvas, 69 x 708"
Courtesy Middendorf Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Sam Gilliam

Born Tupelo, Mississippi, 1933

Received BA, University of Louisville, 1955

Received MA in painting, University of Louisville, 1961

Received Individual Artist Grant, National Endowment for the Arts, 1967;
and Activities Grant, 1973–75

Received John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation fellowship, 1971

Received Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters, University of Louisville,
1980

Lives in Washington, D.C.

Selected Individual Exhibitions, 1980–83

1983

Galerie Darthea Speyer, Paris

1982

Studio Museum in Harlem, New York

Richard Barry Gallery, Minneapolis

Robert Kidd Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan

Marshall University, Huntington, West Virginia

Dart Gallery, Chicago

1981

Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Art Gallery, Washington University, St. Louis

Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo

Nexus Art Gallery, Atlanta

1980

Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington, D.C.

Miami-Dade Public Library, Miami

University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point

Selected Group Exhibitions, 1980–83

1983

“Dimensional Aspects of Painting,” Klein Gallery, Chicago

1982

“10 + 10 + 10,” Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

“American Abstraction Now,” Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond

“Painterly Abstraction,” Ft. Wayne Museum of Art

1981

“Sam Gilliam and Auste,” Hamilton Gallery, New York

1980

“Six Black Americans,” New Jersey State Museum, Trenton

“Afro-American Abstraction,” P.S. 1, Queens, New York, and tour

“Alternatives by Black Artists,” W.P.A. Gallery, Washington, D.C.

“Arts on the Line: Art for Public Transit Spaces,” Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge

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Kingsley, April. *Afro-American Abstraction*. San Francisco: Art Museum Association, 1982.

Larson, Kay. “Skin Deep.” *New York* 14 (March 23, 1981): 58–59.

Monroe, B.A. “Sam Gilliam.” *Black Art International*, Number 4 (1981): 16–24.

Poling, Clark. “Interview: Sam Gilliam.” *Art Papers* 6 (Atlanta, January–February, 1982): 6–8.

Red and Black to “D”: Paintings by Sam Gilliam. New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982.

Welish, Marjorie. “Sam Gilliam and Auste at Hamilton.” *Art in America* 69 (November, 1981): 173.

For a complete bibliography and list of exhibitions prior to 1980, see *Red and Black to “D”: Paintings by Sam Gilliam* (New York, Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982).

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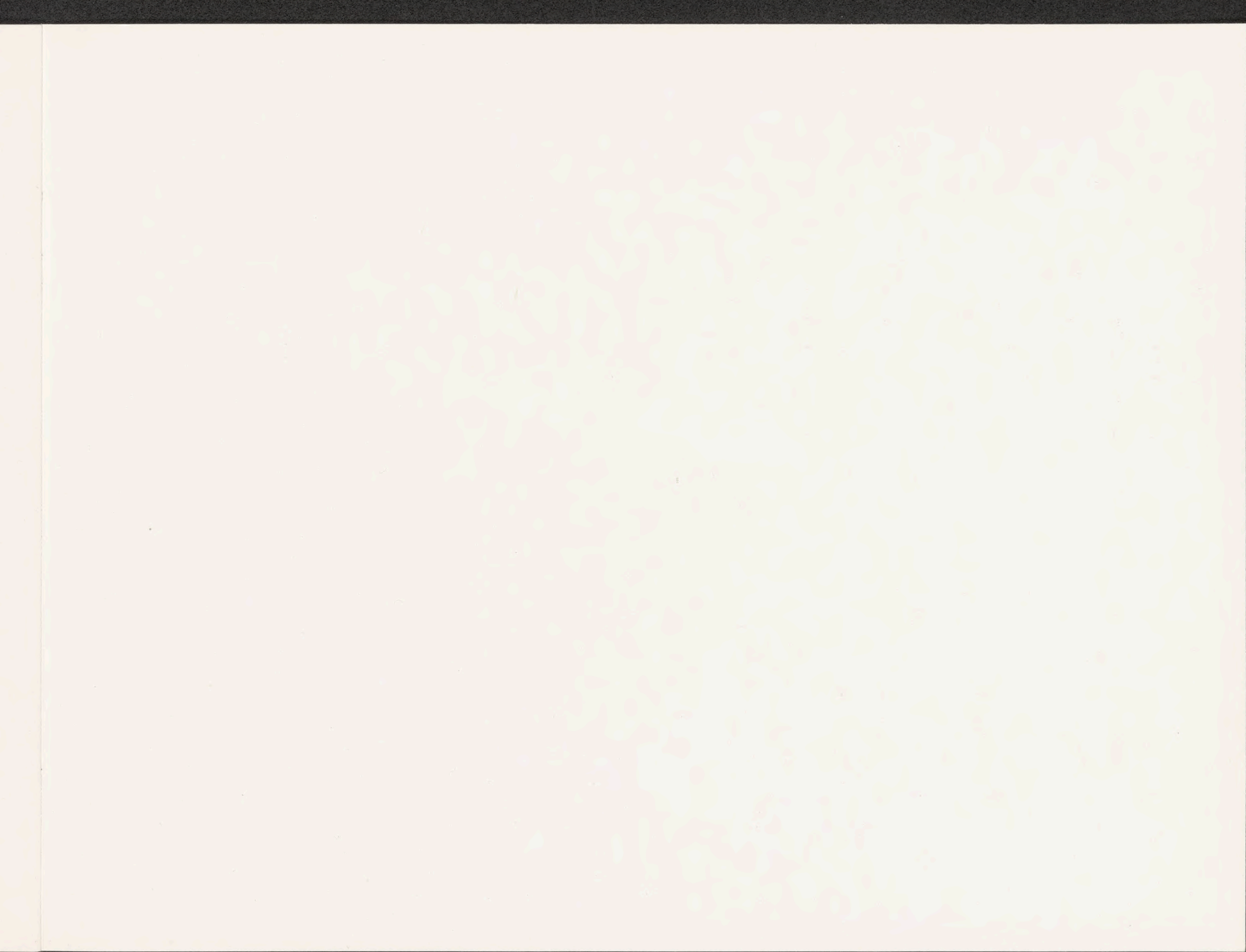
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WASHINGTON, D.C.